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SUBJECT: MEDIA REPORT MISTAKES TRIBAL CONFLICT FOR
POLITICAL VIOLENCE

¶1. (U) Summary. A November 20 wire service report erred in describing a conflict in Bolobo, 175 miles north of Kinshasa, as fighting between Kabila and Bemba supporters. In fact, the violence was a flare-up of a longstanding inter-tribal dispute over land-use rights and had nothing to do with national politics. The DRC Interior Minister has visited the area and is attempting to promote community dialogue. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) A November 20 Reuters dispatch described the flight of over 2000 refugees from the DRC to the Republic of Congo as the result of conflict between supporters of President Joseph Kabila and Vice President Jean-Pierre Bemba, the two candidates in the October 29 DRC presidential election. The source of the report, Jens Hesemann, spokesman for the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) in Kinshasa, was quoted by the reporter as saying, "They fled due to fighting in Equateur province. From what we gather, it was between supporters of the different presidential candidates." (Note: Bolobo is not even in Equateur province, but is in Bandundu province. End note.)

¶3. (U) In fact, as MONUC's Radio Okapi reported the day before, the conflict was a flare-up of a longstanding dispute over land-use rights between two tribes in Bolobo territory, located on the Congo River approximately 175 miles north of Kinshasa in Bandundu province. This was confirmed November 21 by the DRC Interior Ministry, which told us fighting between the Banunu and Batende ethnic groups over forest, fishing and other land rights had broken out on the night of November 15 and lasted through November 19.

¶4. (U) Estimates of the number of people killed in the violence range from six to 10, with some two dozen wounded, primarily by arrows and machetes. Most of the victims were Banunu, who comprise 60 percent of the population; the Batende comprise some 30 percent and hold most customary rights to use of desirable land. A doctor at Bolobo's hospital told AFP more than 100 dwellings and two churches were burned and many of the town's population of 15,000 fled, most to the nearby forest.

¶5. (U) Hesemann confirmed to us that 1941 persons had registered as refugees in the Republic of the Congo by November 20. He said UNHCR's Brazzaville office had dispatched an evaluation team to the area November 19, and was sending a helicopter with supplies for vulnerable refugees. He confirmed he was the source of Reuters story, but said he was incorrectly quoted, saying he may have told the reporter, "rumors were that the fighting had been sparked by presidential politics."

¶6. (U) A delegation led by Interior Minister Denis Kalume met with local dignitaries and officials in Bolobo November 19 and concluded an agreement to establish a community "barza," or local parliament, to facilitate dialogue between the two groups. Radio Okapi reported November 21 that Kalume sacked the district commissioner and army commandant, and instituted several other initiatives aimed at bringing the two communities together. According to Kalume's deputy chief of staff, the delegation returned to Kinshasa November 19 and plans to issue a report tomorrow.

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